

Two Bedroom Cottage For Rent



A Novella Of Horror By  
Raymond M. Towers

Smashwords Edition  
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Some reviews of this ebook:

*This was one of the most scary books I have read in a long time. (anonymous, Barnes and Noble)*

*Fun read. Thought I knew where it was going... nope. (anonymous, Barnes and Noble)*

*A real page turner. I like that fact that part of it really happened. (anonymous, Barnes and Noble)*

*I am a huge horror fan. I have read quite a lot and nothing made me look over my shoulder like this story did. Very impressed. (anonymous, Barnes and Noble)*

*Creepy and realistic enough that the situation could have happened to any of us. Good job. (W. Peterson, Smashwords)*

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(This novella is part of the Demonic Murmurs Collection. For more information on this collection, please refer to the More Books By This Author section at the end of this ebook.)

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## Two Bedroom Cottage For Rent

Oh, how I dreaded returning home!

Even though I was still a few blocks away, my legs had already sensed in which direction I was headed, and were now producing only hesitant and faltering steps towards my residence. Can you believe that? My very body refused to go home!

Go somewhere else, it cried into my head, even though it well knew I had nowhere else to go. Anywhere else, it insisted, even encouraging me to settle down right there on the concrete sidewalk. This place is better than home, my body pleaded, never mind the grass that sprouts from the cracks, or the constant litter that whistles by as it rides the

evening breeze. You can curl up here, right here, on a smooth patch of sidewalk. It will not be too comfortable, no, nor very warm, but it will be safe. Safe, safe, safe!

Regaining my senses, I forced my legs to continue their slow march, glancing beside me to the row of cars parked along the street. In the unflattering reflections of their windows, I could see how weathered my countenance had become. My lips were dry and chapped, my beard stubbly and scraggly, all my features combined together to give me the impression that I was far older than my present age of twenty-five. Attired in my worn jacket and ball cap, I might have even passed for a wandering transient.

A family van cruised by, navy blue and filled with loud, bouncing children, and at its helm sat a stern voiced mother that eyed me suspiciously as she passed. The vehicle pulled into one of the driveways up ahead, its side door instantly sliding open to spill its cargo of playful humanity in several confused directions. I watched as the scolding mother expertly corralled the immature strays toward the front door of the house. As the last of the entourage filtered inside, I thought, what I would give to enter a home such as this one!

Perhaps by crouching, I could enter amongst the children, and convince them that I too was a child. That I too was one of them! I could then hide behind a couch or a drape, and remain there unnoticed until the unholy darkness of night would come and be gone. But alas, this could not be so! It was impossible! Anxiously, I walked around the ass-end of the warm vehicle and continued on my way.

A few yards later, I came across a lazy Rottweiler mutt sitting on a wooden porch. Becoming wary to my presence, it raised its head at my approach, and after I'd further incited its interest, the dog trotted out to meet me. Like a good sentry, it waited by the corner of its yard, intending on mimicking my traverse on the sidewalk with its own steady march alongside me.

Only a short height of chain link fencing separated me from the unruly animal, and this fence's barbed edge was only a few meager inches above the monster's big, broad shoulders. Effortlessly, it matched my pace and issued a low, menacing growl in my direction.

"Why not jump over that ridiculously low barrier?" I challenged the dog. "Why not just follow me all the way home, if you're so big and bad?"

I wondered how long the brutish beast would last, once it was inside my private confines. A couple of hours, a handful of minutes, or just a few fleeting seconds? How long would it take for this powerful canine to be reduced from a violent, rumbling force of nature, and into a quivering mass of spineless yelps and whines? Perhaps, and unlike myself, it would make the wise choice and simply not enter into the house at all. Oh, the conundrum of it all!

A few steps later, the yard and the fence both abruptly ended, the dog was forgotten, and my thoughts quickly slipped elsewhere.

Once again, I was left alone with my own miserable memories. For two long and arduous months, I had resided in an earthly pocket of Hell. Two months, that was a short length of time for most, but not for me. The duration for me was better comparable to that of two lifetimes! When I roamed within this house, I swear to you that the wall clock would deliberately slow itself. It seemed to take hours to slide from one minute to the next, as if it were willing and eager to prolong my suffering while I was in there.

Finally, I reached my own street. The first house I walked by was painted yellow, the second green, the next pink with white trim, and so on and so forth. I passed homes with chipped and peeling paint, yards littered with children's toys, driveways accented by late model imports, and open windows releasing urban pulse-pounding ghetto music. As I moved on, I glanced at the front doors of these structures, so bold and forbidding they were.

What secrets were hiding behind these many doors, I wondered. What atrocities were even now being kept at bay by their restrictive walls? Which of these residences contained deviltries as sinister as those that awaited me at my own dwelling?

Hesitatingly, I came to the worn, bedraggled property on which I resided. Two houses had been built onto this cursed stretch of land, a cumbersome three bedroom monolith, and behind it, my tiny two bedroom guest house. The front residence was partially obscured by the neck-high shrubbery that ran across the entire length of the sidewalk, save for the few exposed yards of the cracked and dilapidated driveway. Five foot high, chain link fencing ran down the sides. The left end of the yard was particularly snarled by a blanket of rampant, serpentine vines that grew from the dirt and all the way up to the top. These vines were so thick that not even daylight could penetrate their dark choking of the fence. And, as an ultimate act of vandalism, both houses had been painted in an unsightly mustard color, an ugly tone that perfectly mirrored their dark personalities.

I had only traveled a few feet into the driveway, when the front door of the main house forcefully slammed shut. Clearly, I was not invited to socialize with my next-door neighbors, nor for that matter did I care to do so. The front house, I knew, kept its own sinister secrets, as evidenced by its late night arguments that would, on occasion, erupt into the sounds of struggle, of breaking dishes, of angry and sometimes chilling screams.

To the immediate left of the main house lay the short passage that led to my own dwelling. It was a bleak path, where the vines were at their thickest, and leafy, sap-laden trees from the neighboring yard would tauntingly reach over and tickle my head sticky with their overhanging branches. At the end of this walkway lay the place where I lived, a place that I would never, ever, endearingly refer to as 'home.'

Its dimensions always brought to mind the archaic term 'servant's quarters'. It might have been described as a cozy cottage in a more affluent neighborhood, with its two small bedrooms, its living room perfectly suited for a thirteen inch portable TV, and a bathroom where two was definitely considered a crowd. No, it wasn't much, but it was indeed the spot where I lay my head at night.

As had become my usual custom, I proceeded to walk around the entire structure first, scrutinizing all the doors and windows for signs of tampering. Once I'd completed this brief inspection, I stopped before the front door. There was no telling what manner of evils the house had lined up for me tonight.

I began to feel a growing dread as I stood there, a pressing urgency to flee in a mad, screaming panic, when a sudden chill bit into my lower spine, and rippled upwards until I thought it would burst right through my head. Natural or not, the bitter chill had very effectively accomplished its task. My trembling hand slowly inserted the key into the keyhole, unlocked it, and encircled the forbidding knob. I literally had to force my fingers to turn it.

Sliding the door open, I held my breath and poked my head in. Nothing malevolent was there to greet me yet, I sighed with relief, nothing dark nor frightening save for the creeping shadows of the evening. Stepping inside, I didn't bother to lock the door behind me, a precaution I'd only recently begun, and made necessary by my need for an urgent and fear induced escape. Taking a customary seat on my old recliner, I patiently waited for the rest of the night to fall. There would be no reading here, of either books or magazines, and no watching of television either, for the house would not allow it. It was expectant of my full attention, and one way or another it meant to have it.

As I sat there in the ensuing obscurity, in the dead silence and noticeable chill, I could feel movement stirring about me. This was not the kind of movement that you can point to and say, 'Hah! There it is!' Instead, it was a different type of motion, invisible to the naked eye, yet discernible by the human mind nonetheless.

This dark energy presented itself in various forms. It could approach as if it were the subtle play of shadows, or announce itself as a sharp drop in room temperature, or it could seek to deceive with a quick, furtive dart in the corner of my eye. Most people would simply dismiss the movement as being the result of the vagaries of their own imagination, but as for me, having already resided in this little Hell for some time, I recognized the black ebb at once for what it was.

It was the house, ready to wreak its mischief. It would always send out a specter or two to ascertain whether or not I brought company in with me, and this night was no exception. Of their own accord, my breaths began to rasp out laboriously, exiting my body in steamy bursts. One of the ghouls approached from the vicinity of the kitchenette, creeping in its sullen manner towards my seat. Its soft steps were audible only to myself, coming nearer and nearer, and at any second, at any moment, I expected the very hand of Lucifer himself to fall upon my shoulder.

For an eternity, the phantom lingered just behind my head, as if undecided on which of its torturous pranks to commit itself to. For now, the demon remained satisfied with its nerve-wracking taunts, and as slowly and quietly as it had approached, it withdrew and left me with only its dreadful memory, and a few shivers and tremors that didn't die away until several minutes later.

This unexpected reprieve allowed my fear to subside temporarily, and my random thoughts to congeal into more coherent patterns. I tried to settle in to recollections of more kinder and gentler times, but my mind kept coming back to the house, and to how I'd ended up in its thorny grasp. The story is neither short nor pleasant, but since the house has so graciously allowed me a few moments respite (no doubt to pacify me now in order to augment the shock on me later), I will go ahead and tell it, in its entirety if possible, or if not, then as much of it as I am able to relate before the night's cruel festivities have begun.

Not too long ago, just a few months' time, matters in my life had been vastly different than they are now. Emotionally, I was in a shambles, undergoing a particularly difficult breakup with a young lady whom I had dated for the past two years. Our relationship had been a tumultuous one from the start, sprinkled with a dash of excitement (or was it tolerance?) here and there, and from that point had proceeded steeply downhill with the reckless abandon of a runaway truck and trailer. Our final disagreement had been bitter, and on her part, even violent, resulting in the expedient

packing of my belongings, and as she so eloquently framed it, me getting ‘THE HELL OUT OF THIS HOUSE!’

I managed to obtain temporary accommodations with a formerly close acquaintance of mine, setting up residence in his home’s guest bedroom. Things were looking up, I thought, until I stepped past the threshold and met the pair of destructive hellions that had cleverly disguised themselves as his small children.

My demanding position as the manager for a high traffic, exclusive and ritzy hotel’s parking garage required my constant attention, taking me from the home for substantial amounts of the working week, and my hours shifted according to the expected traffic flow. In the interim, the two rampant goblins would procure entry into my personal living space, apparently achieving a rare state of bliss after rearranging my belongings into the most random patterns imaginable. Not just some of my belongings, mind you, but each and every one, from the briefs in the underwear drawer, to the rolled up socks in the sock drawer, to the neatly organized shirts and pants in the closet, to my highly prized collection of seventies disco music, to the... Well, you get the idea by now, I’m sure.

Placing a security chain on the bedroom door didn’t faze them in the least, as they resorted to prying the window latches open with butter knives, taken right under the nose of their inattentive mother. In an attempt to counter their deviousness, I made it a loud point to hammer the windows shut one afternoon, but the very next day, I discovered that those butter knives worked just as well on the security chain as they had on the window latches. I thought a sliding bolt would finally rid me of my worries, until I observed that the door had been kicked in when I arrived the next evening, and I found the bolt and hardware lying on the carpet with wood shavings still clinging to the displaced screws. (Of course, the mother claimed she hadn’t heard a thing while her children were busy kicking open the door. Perhaps she was in cahoots with my former girlfriend, but I never did find that out for certain.) My frustrations fell upon deaf ears, as the only viable solution from my hosts’ point of view was for me to move back in with my ex.

Excuse me? I should be moving back in with my ex? How utterly preposterous! Imagine me, sniveling and cowering, crawling back on my hands and knees, begging for forgiveness and asking for a second chance from the woman who had thrown me out! After two long years, I was once again a bachelor, free from binding ties and dreadful obligations, and free from the punishment of required household chores. I was free to roam the earth, to stare and ogle at whom I pleased, and when I pleased, and for as long as I pleased! I was free to leave my phone number for the waitress to find, free to issue seductive winks to the girl at the end of the bar. If my two hosts were any indication of a happy matrimony, I said to myself, then to hell with married life!

After such harassment, my vindictive side was bound to come out. I gave the two troublemakers, as well as their insensitive parents, one last, dire warning not to touch any of my belongings, then proceeded to set mouse traps in choice locations throughout my bedroom. As you may have guessed, this is the juncture where my close acquaintance turned into my former acquaintance, and amidst threats of police action and lawsuits, I was given one week to find a new place to live.

I spent the next few days scouring through the ‘For Rent’ ads in the newspaper and shuttling back and forth across town looking at prospective places. Half a dozen rentals still remained on my list when I happened across that unforgettable flyer, awkwardly taped on the long stem of a street light.

TWO BEDROOM COTTAGE  
\$475 PER MONTH, UTILITIES INCLUDED  
3973 EAST LANE  
CALL MARLA AT 232-3101

I found the rent quote to be quite appealing, as most of the studios I'd checked out were going for an even higher rate. The neighborhood, on the other hand, I did not particularly care for, since I might have had a run-in or two with their local toughs, back during my own hell-raising days. In spite of this, I jotted down the number, and that afternoon I gave Marla a call. The older Haitian woman was as cooperative and friendly as could be, and we arranged for a showing later in the week.

I first laid eyes on the house just a few days later. I admit that it looked rather drab, with its odd mustard color and lifeless exterior. From the outset, I noted that there wasn't much of a view. I could see the rear of the main house from the living room window, and the littered back alley, along with a couple of weedy, undeveloped lots, was visible from the small kitchen portal on the opposite side of the so-called cottage. Much of the interior was dowdy as well, from the brown trimmed kitchen floor tiles to the brown and orange, flowered curtains. The stove I found to be grimy and stained, roach droppings were in evidence on the cupboards, and the kitchen sink was leaky. Worst of all, the place was cold. Even though it was only early autumn, and the sun was still shining brightly outside, the temperature inside the dwelling was nothing short of icy.

Sure, the house had its shortcomings, but there was nothing some solvents and elbow grease couldn't clean up. Marla also agreed to reimburse any upgrades I made through rent reduction, and with the rent as low as it was, I couldn't afford to pass the place up. Heck, if I got a roommate down the line, I'd only be paying less than three hundred bucks a month! We agreed on the terms, I filled out some paperwork, dished out the security deposit and first month's rent, and received two sets of house keys in return. I made plans to move in, the following afternoon after work.

Eager to be rid of those ransacking urchins and their less than benevolent parents, I arrived promptly at my new home. My entire collection of belongings came with me; two briefcases of clothing, three boxes of odds and ends, my portable television, and a pair of borrowed blankets. Surveying the barren household brought to mind that some furniture might be in order.

After a short bus ride to the local Goodwill, I returned the proud owner of a pair of used twin size beds, a ridiculously small kitchen table with four matching chairs, and a recliner and sofa clothed in fall hues that didn't clash too badly with the grimy orange carpet. Said items could have been delivered much easier courtesy of the back alley, but the delivery men, being experts in their field, instead parked their shifty, oversized truck in the driveway of the main residence, and carried the bulky furniture down the crowded walkway and through the front door. With something approaching glee I stood aside and allowed the two workers to bring my items inside.

It was then that my neighbors from the main house made a rare public appearance, perhaps out of curiosity over whether or not the puffy sofa would fit through the tight front door. The first to arrive was an old and foulmouthed woman, who feigned hanging laundry on the clothesline, but was in actuality only moving it from the first row to the

second, and who continually cursed me for having chosen that particular day to take up residence. Soon after she retreated, a boy and girl in their teens walked by, their eyes listless and downcast, and looking so much alike that I took them to be twins, and most probably the old hag's grand-children. The silent carousel moved on, and the two Goths were replaced by what I supposed to be their father, who was the strangest of the bunch. The man was in his late thirties, fair skinned and inquisitive, his hair permed into soft waves and dyed a bold shade of blonde. His interest in the deliverymen, I noticed, was more than casual as he observed them from different angles, and he carried with him a small napkin to wipe the drool from his mouth. This man, not coincidentally, was the sole person to acknowledge my arrival, casting a knowing nod in my direction every so often. The general attitude of indifference suited me fine, since I myself preferred privacy over publicity.

In my haste, I had neglected to purchase additional blankets, and that first night I had to damn near put on my entire wardrobe to fend off the arctic chill of the house. The second night, I didn't fare much better, as the nippy cold penetrated past the woolly thickness of four blankets. I awoke in the morning with a pounding headache, and a nose so runny I had no choice but to call in sick. As midday approached, I discovered I had somehow contracted a fever, and after gulping down a few aspirin, I settled in for a slumber that proved to be a hundred times more peaceful than what had passed for sleep during the past two nights. Unfortunately, my fever worsened with the approach of darkness, and much to the annoyance of my short-tempered boss, I had to miss two more days of work before the illness finally broke. On my fifth day in the house, my fever was completely gone, and slowly, steadily, I began to regain my energies. The worst, I thought, must surely now be behind me.

I had never been so utterly wrong in my entire life.

During the day, things were quite normal, but that might have been because I was usually not at home. For the majority of the following week, I picked up extra hours here and there to make up for lost wages, reducing my time at home to a mad rush of showers and shaving, and consuming alarming quantities of sweetened cereals, frozen dinners, and whatever leftovers I brought home from the local fast food joints. I must remind you, this is what I did during the daytime hours, when sunlight was in bloom, and warm breezes were still flowing through the cottage's open windows.

It wasn't until the lights went off that strange things transpired. In addition to the wintry temperatures, which gnawed and bit at my exposed skin like a writhing mass of starved maggots, I was introduced to even more sinister peculiarities of the house. For one thing, it was quiet. Not a relaxing kind of quiet, or a library kind of quiet, but the tense and clammy quiet of graveyards. It was a disconcerting quiet, where the slightest noises were magnified almost beyond comprehension.

The irregular drops from the sink, which were sometimes heard throughout the night, or sometimes heard not at all, resounded loudly as if wanting to draw a vain attention to their selves. At times, they dripped into the awaiting sink bowl with the clamor of Chinese gongs.

Also, as if to aid in breaking this dead silence, lonely canines from far and near would raise their grizzled snouts and howl in an unholy chorus where the sirens they serenaded were heard by them, and only by them, and which seemingly emanated from a centralized location within my living room.



Then there were the murmurs, coming from within the walls themselves, and the sobs, carrying into my bedroom from the rest of the house, and the sounds of hushed voices that I fervently hoped were only emerging from my own imagination.

There, do you hear that? From the other room, listen! Listen! Soft whimpers, like a child's, that's what I heard. You didn't? Never mind, you'll see soon enough. Now where was I? The silence? The voices? Enough about that! Let us move on to other, much nastier things.

Then came the bites. The bites! THE BITES!! Tiny shots of pain, sharp jolts as if from needles, tearing into my flesh and rousing me from the deepest slumbers. These weren't gradual and tingly like flea bites or mosquito bites, no sir! These were deliberate pinches and minute stabbings! Harsh enough to bring wincing and tears from my eyes, startling enough to make me turn the lights on and disassemble the bed looking for what I presumed to be insect culprits. But there was no evidence! Not on my legs or arms, not squirming about under my covers, not anywhere except, I thought, as in the case of the murmurs, from the confines of my own confused head. At the moment, how was I to know it wasn't just me and my imagination!

I suppose that with the passage of time, I became more tolerant, or ignorant, but not quite immune to the house's foul moods. So, like a truly challenged opponent, it stepped up its efforts. I found myself tossing and turning about late one night, anticipating the liberating moment when fatigue finally overcame my restlessness, when the outdoor sounds of murmuring voices and scuffling footsteps brought me to complete attention. I mentally followed the whispers and footfalls as they rounded the corner of the house, and continued right up to my front door. Soft scrapes began to pry against the lock on the front door.

Like an assassin, I slipped from the bed and crawled over to the closet, where I kept an old baseball bat expressly for occasions such as these. Arming myself with the weapon, I left the sanctuary of the bedroom, and quietly stepped into the living room. Abruptly, the scratches stopped and cautiously, I peered past the curtains, discovering that no living soul was about. Similar results were reached after I'd systematically checked each and every possible point of entry into the house, from the pair of doors to the heavily barred windows. With no small amount of preoccupation, I took a wary seat on the recliner, and it was there that an untold time later I would finally find sleep.

The scraping sounds returned a few nights later, this time from the window just a few inches above my head. I rolled from the bed, retrieving my bat from its new resting place against the nightstand, and viciously tore the curtains from the wall. The view of empty night sky momentarily confounded me, until the sound of rapidly retreating footsteps spurred me into immediate action, and I bolted towards the front door. Several precious seconds were lost as I unlocked the door, but the instant it swung open, I dashed outside.

My impatient strides carried me through the dark path, and it wasn't until I reached the sidewalk that I brought myself to a screeching halt. Panting from the exertion, I shot hawk-like glances towards all areas of the darkly cloaked street.

For a handful of long, frustrating minutes, I simply stood there, until the nagging coldness of the night air swept past the rush of adrenalin and into my sleeping clothes. Slowly, angrily, I turned back towards the house.

Stepping over the cold concrete of the driveway, my gaze swept to the entryway of the main house, where a lone figure sat on the porch's narrow cement steps. A cigarette illuminated a portion of the man's face. It was my strange neighbor with the wavy blond hair, ogling my sturdy frame through the tank top and boxer shorts, until his eyes came upon the smooth club brandished in my grip.

Once I'd dismissed him as being the guilty party, I spoke out aggressively. "Did you see anybody run through here?"

Slowly, apprehensively, the man cringed and shook his head, an impotent action that almost made me take the bat to his head anyway. Our gazes were fixed on one another, neither one of us daring to move, and in that brief span of time, he might have realized the enormity of my barely harbored and grim potential. Then, our movements almost synchronized, we parted, me down the blackened walkway, and he up the steps and into his house, leaving the smoldering cigarette behind on the top step, as a defiant talisman meant to ward off demons, or perhaps merely bat-wielding, unpredictable back house tenants.

Be certain of one thing, I had made a few enemies in the past. Some even from this very neighborhood, I thought as I reentered the embrace of the cold cottage. Perhaps, I pondered, these past rivals had discovered that a former adversary was now again in their midst, and therefore, I had walked right into their clutches. A situation swiftly remedied, I surmised, locking myself in, and turning the bedroom light on. From the closet, I pulled out the last of my boxed belongings, which included a small caliber pistol, a .280 Davis automatic. It was a weapon I had hoped never to use again, but in the here and now, its uncontested protection and brashness was heartily welcomed.

As if contemplating my startling reaction to the outside phenomena, the house ceased its peripheral pranks, and concentrated instead on attacking me inside my own head, barraging me with the most dreadful nightmares. Their grisly details followed me long after daybreak; dismembered and crimson corpses limping through the house, friends and acquaintances plotting and carrying out vicious murders, including my own, and visions of barely human predators stalking and hunting down much weaker and defenseless prey while I watched from nearby, and worse. Oh, some of these nightmares were considerably worse.

I didn't realize it at first, but I began dreading the time I spent inside the house. I took any excuse to work longer hours, and after work, I would frequently invite my buddies out for drinks or burgers, or do anything at all to avoid going home. It was during one of these occasions that I first met Uma.

I was at one of the downtown dance clubs, in what should have been just another night out with the boys. My buddies were all having a good time, making one beer after another disappear, and pouncing upon any hapless female that happened to glance in their direction. Me, I was just sitting idly at our table, pretending to enjoy the company and the music, but in reality, I was desperately trying to figure out a way to prolong having to go back 'There.'

One of my friends tried to coerce me onto the dance floor. He managed to get me to the edge of the gyrating crowd, where we both stood for a few minutes. Eventually, he found a dance partner and I didn't. As I started to return to my seat, I inadvertently bumped into a girl. A very pretty girl.

I remember our conversation perfectly.

“I’m sorry...” I started weakly. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Oh, that’s okay.” She replied automatically. “I wasn’t watching where I was going, anyway.”

It was at that point that we both got a good look at each other. The young woman’s height was nearly equal to mine, and for a long, lingering moment, we both stood there as if transfixed. Her large brown eyes produced a gaze that was both curious and seductive, her lips were full and warm, her voice strong, yet very feminine. Her black hair was unusually long, reaching down to her lower back, and in sharp contrast gave her soft, light skin a very sensual radiance. She wore a dark, luxurious leather jacket over a black blouse, that did little to hide her full breasts. Her tight black skirt stopped abruptly a few inches above her knees to reveal her long, toned legs. Her name, of course, was Uma.

The blaring music, and the low murmur of a hundred conversations, all seemed to fade away before her presence. I couldn’t bring myself to turn away from her eyes, for fear of shattering the special moment. “Would you like to have a seat with me?” I asked, summoning up my courage.

“I’d like to, but I really can’t.” Uma answered, glancing sideways. “My friend and I were just about to go.” Turning back to me, she smiled. “I don’t know, maybe I should stay a little longer after all.” Such a sweet, sweet voice she had.

“You’re leaving already?” I asked, knowing that it was still fairly early.

“We have a long drive back home.” She admitted. “I live almost two hours away from here, in Los Angeles.”

“Where’s your friend?” I asked, suddenly concerned that Uma would soon be gone. At the same time, I was hoping that this ‘friend’ of hers was not male in gender. “Maybe I can convince your friend to stay? Is it a he or a she, by the way?”

“‘She’ went to the ladies’ room.” Uma informed me, to my obvious relief. “We really do have to go, because we both have classes in the morning.”

“Well, what if we both get lost in this crowd?” I kidded. “If anything, it’ll give us a few more minutes to talk...”

At that instant, the song being played ended, and another, more popular tune took its place. “This is my song!” Uma said excitedly. “Come on, dance with me!”

Taking hold of my hand, she led me onto the dance floor, where we squeezed into a cramped space between the other dancing couples. Immediately, Uma began dancing, her sensuous movements adding greatly to my attraction for her. (Although I could lay no claim to being an accomplished dancer, I held my own. I was into disco, remember?) Pressed in by the other dancers, I found that our two forms frequently touched, and the thought of Uma’s body next to mine did produce chills, although these were the good kind.

Uma brushed against me flirtatiously, briefly encircling my neck with her arms. Then, she released me, smiling teasingly as she moved away. The song went on, and we rhythmically danced, becoming oblivious to our surroundings. There was only the thumping beat, and me, and her. Just as I was settling into this entirely pleasant mood, the song ended, abruptly intercepted by the following track, and our magical bond was broken.

“Aaww!” Uma complained. “The DJ cut the song off early!”

In irritation, I briefly thought of climbing over the towering speakers and strangling the poor fool.

“I really have to go.” Uma said, speaking loudly to break the wall of pounding bass. “There’s my friend, over there.” She pointed.

Uma took my hand and directed me off the dance floor and towards another pretty female. She introduced us, and as our words were being exchanged, I unwittingly caught the facial expression Uma gave her friend. It was a brief glance towards me, followed by her beautiful smile and the raising of her eyebrows. Right then, I knew that Uma felt the same way about me as I was feeling about her. It was lust at first sight.

Uma repeated that she had classes in a few short hours, and both women agreed that it was time for them to depart. Sensing our mutual attraction, Uma’s friend politely left first. We exited the club shortly thereafter, pausing out front to talk. I wanted to find out so much about her, but I only had a couple of short minutes. That would not be enough, I thought. “I wish you didn’t have to go so soon.”

Blushing, Uma lowered her head. When she looked to me again, her eyes smiled as deliciously as her lips did. “I don’t want to go.” She replied. “But I have to. You know I do.”

Her friend pulled up to the curb, wisely parking a few yards ahead of us.

With her departure being so imminent, I became speechless. For several long moments, no empty words crossed the expanse between us. Our hands were clasped together, and the only movement came from Uma, who was giddily bouncing on her heels. Her wide, luscious smile beamed at me, and I gave in to its intoxicating hold.

Until now, I hadn’t even thought to ask Uma for her phone number. Awkwardly, I blurted out the request. After hearing those words, Uma’s eyes actually seemed to glow even brighter. She related her number to me easily, and I, caught unprepared as I usually was, searched fruitlessly through my pockets for something to write with. Giggling at my ineptitude, Uma ran to her friend’s car, and finally jotted down her number on an old napkin. As she returned to hand me the paper, she looked back at me, uncertain of what would happen next.

Instinctively, I reached out for her, my arms tightly clenching her body. In the embrace, I tried to convey the desire and passion I felt for her. She responded by holding me just as tightly, and nuzzled her head high against my shoulder. When our embrace finally ended, and our arms slipped away from each other, I found myself longing to kiss her, yet I could not bring myself to do it. My indecision cost me dearly, as the perfect moment rapidly faded away. Uma stepped over to the car, dropping into her seat, and instantly I regretted not having done it. We said goodbye to each other, and I watched dumbfounded as the door shut and the vehicle quickly drove away.

I could not get Uma out of my mind, and even after I was dropped off at home, I could barely resist reaching out for the phone and dialing her precious number. As far as I was concerned, things could not get any better that night, and strangely enough, the house made no attempt to ruin my mood.

The next day at work, I found myself frequently thinking about Uma. In my head, I repeated the pleasant images from the previous night over and over, completely wiping away the bitter moments I’d spent inside the house. The frightening events I’d gone through no longer seemed to have happened to me, but to someone else, far away.

Due to a slow day at the hotel, I got home much earlier than usual that evening. I prepared a TV dinner for myself, and sat down on my recliner to eat and watch the telly. I found my eyes frequently hovering over the phone. I was doing this so much, that pretty

soon the television lost its appeal entirely, and I ended up shutting it off. Around seven pm was the best time to call, I recalled Uma saying, and as that time neared I found myself becoming more and more agitated. Finally, at seven o'clock on the button, I could wait no more. I dialed Uma's number, and surprisingly, there was an answer on the very first ring.

"Hello." I greeted clumsily. "Is Uma home?"

"Hi." She replied. "It's me."

"Are you busy?"

"I'm just sitting here by the phone, doing some homework." She said. "But that can wait." Pausing thoughtfully, she added. "You know, I didn't think you were going to call me."

"How can you say that?" I asked, in disbelief. "I couldn't stop thinking about you all day!"

"I don't know." Uma said. "I thought you might be going out with your friends again."

"I'm not 'into' going to the clubs." I said, truthfully. "I don't go out that much at all. It's just that, I..." I could hear the house snickering behind me. "I just had to get away from home for a while. You know how things are, you go to work, you go home, and then you have to go to work all over again. I needed a break last night." Then, I added flirtatiously, "I was lucky enough to run into you, wasn't I? I'm suddenly finding no desire to go out anymore."

Uma giggled at my corny remark.

As our conversation continued, I found we never experienced that awkward initial phase that sometimes occurs when two people first start talking to one another. Our talk flowed smoothly and pleasantly, as if we were already close friends. There were no abrupt silences where we didn't know what to say next, and no prickly comments that shouldn't have been uttered. The conversation jumped from one subject to another, and I was pleased to find that we shared many common interests.

I learned a lot about her; Uma was twenty-three and worked part time as a hospital intern. She was studying medicine at a junior college on the outskirts of Los Angeles, and if her application were to be approved, as she suspected it would, she would eventually be transferring over to a larger university. In fact, her best prospect was the University of Nevada, and she had done plenty of legwork towards making her upcoming transition as smooth as possible. She'd already obtained next semester's schedule for the out of state college, found interested employers in related job opportunities, and had even located suitable areas for student housing. She was really on the ball, for a woman.

Some time later, our conversation began to take a more personal tone. "I've been kind of kicking myself about this." I admitted to her. "Last night, I really wanted to kiss you, right before your car drove away."

"I would have let you." She revealed, seductively. "I really wanted you to."

I sighed.

Our conflicting work and school schedules left us little time to converse, and much less to date. On top of that, the considerable distance between us was a huge factor in keeping us from seeing each other. With no other appealing alternatives, we agreed to talk on the phone again a few days later.

It was ten o'clock by the time we said our goodbyes. As I returned the phone to its cradle, I was already looking forward to the next time I spoke with Uma. I leaned back on my recliner, and lazily stretched my feet onto the footrest. My jovial mood was yanked away by a sudden lurch backward from the recliner. The sensation of panic and falling were brief, yet frightening nonetheless. Cautiously, I righted myself, all the while wondering why this strange incident, which had never before occurred, decided to take place at this precise moment in time.

Those strange, inexplicable bites plagued me incessantly that night, even worse than they had before. Instead of one single prick, every so often, I was being hit with multiple shots simultaneously. It felt as if a handful of needles were being stabbed into my back, and a couple of hours later, the same thing would happen to another part of my body, like my foot or my ass. In this manner, my extremities suffered the most, but my face and neck did not escape affliction. Feeling this pain on my fingers and toes was especially excruciating, as it felt like portions of my skin were being nipped off. Only by turning on the bedroom light, and keeping it on all night, did I ward off the pinches long enough to find some sleep.

Over the next few days, I began thinking about the eerie things that went on in the house. During the brief period I had lived there, I considered, I had experienced events that were clearly beyond reason. Instead of blaming my own paranoia, like I usually did, I began to consider another, much weirder alternative. Perhaps the house itself was haunted.

Now, let me reiterate that I am not now, nor have I ever been, certifiably insane. In fact, before I moved into the house, I would actively berate and shun everything about the paranormal. However, the situation between when I was in the house, and when I was anywhere else, was as sharp a contrast as night is to day.

To test out my theory that the house was indeed haunted, I would need witnesses. Up until this point, everything I had gone through had happened to me while I was alone, and of course, I could not simply call a friend or fellow worker into my confidence and start jabbering away at them. Who would believe my story? I could already see myself, being dragged away by the men in white coats, kicking away and struggling to free myself from a straitjacket, while at the same time frothing at the mouth and screaming like a lunatic. Later, after some lengthy period of interrogation and medication, some experienced lunatic analyzer would introduce me to a padded room, and say with a plastic grin, 'Unlike your previous residence, this room actually likes you. It likes you very much, in fact.'

Approaching my drinking buddies would be just as bad. All I could expect from them was ridicule and remarks for me to lay off sniffing glue, which of course, I'd given up a long time ago. 'Hey, guys, guess what?' I imagined myself telling them, over another round of the sudsy stuff. 'I think I ticked off my house the other day, and now it keeps wanting to kick my ass. What gives, man?'

Refusing to simply cower away like a wretched dog with its tail between its legs, I decided to do some cold calculating of my own. I formulated a plan, the first step of which required a phone call to the landlady, in order to investigate the background of the house. Marla proved a bit elusive, and later, evasive, so I reluctantly dropped that item from my list. Second, I called up as many of my friends as I could, arranging a late night get-together at my place. I urged them to bring plenty of beer and chips, in the hopes that

some of them would end up staying the night. Inviting so many strangers inside, I surmised, was sure to throw the house off guard.

Once I got to the residence, I instituted the regular practice of checking the exterior of the structure, looking over all the doors and windows, and even going as far as pulling on the security bars to ensure their strength. Once I had assured myself that nothing and no one could easily get in, I turned my attention to the interior. Mentally, I observed the contents of each and every room, familiarizing myself both with the type and size of the objects, and with their general placement. Finally, as daylight began to wane, I clicked on nearly every light in the structure, defying the shadows to creep out and face the glare.

Later, satisfied that I had done all I could, I settled down and waited for my company to arrive. My friends began trickling in, carrying either six packs of alcohol, bags of chips, or rented action movies. As the partying began in earnest, we proceeded in consuming everything we could lay our hands on, and twice had to go out to replenish our liquor supplies. I encouraged the others into participating in a beer chugging contest, with the winner being the first person to pass out. Almost predictably, the one who fell incoherent the fastest was myself.

I awoke from my intoxicated slumber much later, just a few strokes shy of ten in the morning. Most of my entourage had slipped away earlier, but fortunately two of my buddies still remained. One lay sprawled awkwardly across the bed in the second bedroom, while the other was draped over the recliner, mumbling unintelligibly when he saw me walking by. As I stood there in the living room, trying to piece together the previous night's events, I noticed something regarding the house's atmosphere. I wore only a thin covering of clothing, a tee shirt and jeans, yet I was not cold. Countless times before this night, I would be shivering even when under mountains of blankets. But not this morning! As I had hoped, the house had stayed away from me. I had successfully driven the evil away. I had beaten it! I thought gleefully, I had won!

My buddy on the recliner had phased over from muttering to loud snoring. It was a bothersome noise, but one that I could gladly live with, considering the darker alternative. I retreated back into my own bedroom to get dressed for work.

So encouraged was I with these favorable developments, that I reserved that night exclusively for Uma. I made no plans other than to be home beside the phone and awaiting her call. Sweet thoughts of her began dancing around in my mind, and I began to realize just how much I longed to hold her close again. To feel her breath against my skin, to run my fingers through her soft hair, that, my friends, was pure heaven.

Not too much later, the phone started shaking in excitement, mirroring the anticipation that I was feeling. Once our greetings were finished, we picked up exactly where we'd left off previously, as if we'd been apart mere seconds, instead of a stretch of several days. Our conversation leapt from minutes to hours, with neither of us willing to break free from the other. Inevitably, however, the moment came when we had to say goodbye, but the woeful event was considerably softened by an unexpected kiss from the receiver.

"That," Uma said. "Was what I wish I had done to you, that first night!"

As I replaced the phone on its cradle, I knew I was falling in love with her.

Still feeling somewhat lightheaded, I stood up, intending to retire for the night. Shockingly, I was halted in my tracks by an overwhelming sensation of chilling, gnawing

fear. In that unparalleled moment, I could not move or think. A few seconds later, I found myself gasping for air, realizing that I had unconsciously been holding my breath. I made slow progress towards my bedroom, shivering with every single step that I took. The dark, encompassing cold had once again returned to the house.

Hazily, I remembered asking one of my buddies if he were cold, during the previous night's powwow.

"No." He had answered drunkenly. "It's just you, man."

The words echoed hollowly inside my head. It's just me, I thought. None of my friends had exhibited any discomfort the previous night. Thinking back, the only other person who had entered the house since I had moved in was Marla, the landlady. When she had been showing me the place, she hadn't seemed affected by the cold either. In fact, she gave me a puzzled expression when I had mentioned it.

It's just you, my head confirmed to me. This was something that I hadn't fully considered before. Like a vengeful, sentient being, the house itself was battering me, and only me, from the moment I'd stepped through the front door. It was clinging to my body like a malicious leech, tormenting my mind with its vile thoughts and nightmares, and torturing my body with its unfaltering iciness and pinpricks.

"You're a demon, aren't you?" I asked out loud.

The unforgiving darkness did not answer, and that night, like so many others before it, I had to sleep with the light on, under the cover of half a dozen blankets.

The following morning, I awoke, still groggy and half asleep. For most of the night, I had wrestled with a myriad of nagging nightmares, and could still recount many of the details vividly. I remembered that I was being pursued by an oversized, axe-wielding barbarian. This stout menace was heavily bearded and scraggly, and his bulging, rage filled eyes revealed that his insanity knew no boundaries. This man wore a furry, animal skin tunic, held around the vast waist by a thin, leather belt.

In every one of these nightmares, one grisly detail haunted me. This was the large, double blade axe, dripping with blood, that the madman carried in his grip. Of course, at the conclusion of my dream, the blood dripping from its ends was always mine.

I had gotten up late and so hurriedly ran into the bathroom, where I quickly undressed for my morning shower. As I casually pulled open the shower curtain, I was startled to see the same barbarian from my nightmares, crouching patiently inside my bathtub. Swiftly, he stood up, dwarfing me with his massive frame. This angry giant stepped towards me, lifting his hairy arms high and preparing to swing his crimson stained weapon. I lifted my arms up protectively around my head, and instinctively hurled my body backwards. My back painfully slammed into the bathroom door, and as I fell to the floor, I immediately curled my body up. I knew that I had no chance against this monster, or his weapon. That huge axe could easily cut me in half.

My eyes were tightly shut as I braced myself for the impact. For many tense moments, I did not move. Hesitatingly, I lifted my head, and opened my eyes. Finding myself alone in the bathroom, I cautiously got to my feet. I was half expecting the apparition to return, and when it did not, I wondered if I had somehow carried over the previous night's dreams into my conscious mind. Regardless of the reason, I was still shaken badly enough to take the fastest shower of my life. Dressing quickly, I left the house as soon as I could.



That night, I tried to round up my buddies for another night of boozing and carrying on, but being a weeknight, only a couple made it in. A single vehicle brought the two of them, Jesse and Steve, into the alleyway behind the house. Their arrival was less than discreet, as they pulled in honking their horn and flashing their lights. Steve brought in the liquor, two twelve packs, and set them on the living room coffee table. Jesse was the driver, and he stayed behind to lock up the car and bring in the rest of the edibles.

As I took my customary seat on the recliner, Steve tossed me the first beer, which I gladly popped open. We could hear Jesse fumbling with the outside gate, and then with the back door.

“I don’t really need any help over here.” He complained sarcastically. “But thanks anyway, guys.”

I heard the door close shut, and a few seconds later, a loud gasp, followed by the sound of falling grocery bags. Alarmed, I glanced over at Steve, and the both of us bolted from our seats and hurried into the kitchen.

Jesse was standing there, immobile and open-mouthed, just a few feet from the back door. His face was ashen, his eyes bulging, and his body trembling. The bags he’d been carrying were now on the floor, one going as far as spilling out some of its unsecured potato chip cargo.

“What happened?” Steve asked, rushing to Jesse’s side.

Jesse shook his head, dazed. “I dunno.” He replied. “When I stepped through the door, something went through me. Something went right through my body.”

Jokingly, Steve commented that he probably just had a bad case of gas. This produced a good laugh among us, helping to ease an anxious Jesse back to normal. Once the kitchen was cleaned up, the three of us went into the living room, and further comforted our buddy with a beer. I continued to rib Jesse, trying to get him to elaborate on what had happened to him, but he quickly clammed up.

Reluctantly, I dropped the matter, but as the conversation turned to other subjects, I noticed that something strange was still bothering my friend. Every so often, Jesse would glance over his shoulder, or turn his head sharply towards an unoccupied corner of the living room. As my buddy got more intoxicated, these unexplainable actions became more blatant. Steve nudged my arm, motioning for me to find out what was troubling him.

“Hey.” I groggily said to Jesse, feeling the effects of too much alcohol for myself. “Are you alright? Is everything okay?”

“I dunno, man.” Jesse replied, gazing from me to Steve, and back. “I just feel like... Like someone is watching me. I can almost see them, too. Out of the corner of my eye, I can make out a shape, like a person’s shape. But when I turn to look straight at it, the shape always disappears.

“I say,” Steve interrupted, chuckling. “No more beer for this guy.”

“Naw, really, man.” Jesse continued, seeming almost paranoid as he looked around the room. “I think this house is haunted. I’m kind of sensitive to these things.”

“The only thing haunted around here is your own ass.” Steve kidded. “You know you want to cut another fart, and you’re just trying to blame somebody else for it.”

Steve teased Jesse for a while, but I didn’t. The revelation sobered me up a little, and I started feeling edgy again. Pretty soon, I thought I was seeing dancing shadows and

materializing specters myself. The only way I could get these images out of my head, it seemed, was to keep drinking beer.

Later that night, Jesse announced that it was time for him to be going. I tried to persuade him to stay, but he refused to listen. Steve didn't understand why I was so adamant about them staying, and why Jesse was just as set on leaving, but he had little choice in the outcome. Jesse was his ride home, and Steve soon followed him out.

Over the next week, the harrowing incidents persisted and unbelievably, they got worse. I made several attempts to find a roommate, none of which resulted in success. My buddies would come over, spend a night or two, and uniformly refuse to visit any further. Within my tight social circle, word began to spread that my house was not a good place to be. Mysterious visions would haunt my few visitors, strange noises would wake them at odd hours of the night, and unseen hands would touch and chill their bodies.

"Move out!" My friends warned. "Get out of that place!"

By avoiding my house, my friends inadvertently began to avoid me as well. I was left to myself, which was fine by me, since I'd been alone many a time before.

My only consolation was Uma. I talked to her as frequently as our schedules allowed, and sometimes long into the night. Her soft words soothed my troubled spirit, dispelling every dreadful thought from my mind. I began to love her, and I so badly wanted to tell her this. I promised myself that I would, as soon as I was rid of the plague of horrors that the house had set on me. The house, of course, knew how I felt already, and as it sulked deeply in its macabre mood, it began to unleash even more of its evil spells upon me.

I began to wake up listening to strange conversations, obvious murmurings that made me feel as if I were spying in on someone else's household. Two, sometimes more, parties would be engaged in animated, and sometimes heated debate. Usually I only heard male voices, but on occasion, a female voice would also surface. The eerie conversations seemed to be taking place just a few feet away, in the living room or the second bedroom, but a few times, these strange voices were coming from opposite sides of my own bed. I could clearly hear each voice, and from my position on the bed, I had no choice but to listen in on the words being said. Unfortunately, as soon as I was fully awake and sat up in bed, the entire conversation would be erased from my memory. I could only recall that I had heard several, distinct voices, and nothing more.

The barbarian returned also, thereafter reappearing at the least expected moment, and at different places throughout the house. Sometimes he would stand just behind the front door when I got home. Other times, he would sit on the recliner, or on a kitchen chair, waiting patiently for me to discover him. His favorite hiding place, however, was the first place I'd encountered him, behind the shower curtain. Nearly every morning, he would lurk behind that cursed plastic sheet.

He was the worst, but soon, some of his friends began to show up. Some of them looked like pirates, others like convicts. Grimacing or sneering, these scoundrels were frequently leaping out of the house's many shadows, threatening me with every weapon conceivable. Machetes, swords, knives, spiked clubs, screwdrivers, you name it, and I saw it being swung at my head or jabbed at my middle.

The worst of these harrowing experiences occurred late one afternoon, just after I got home from work. The front door was wide open, and after dropping my backpack on

the recliner, I stepped over to the kitchen. I heard the soft scrape of footsteps behind me, and immediately realized that someone had followed me inside. I whirled around, facing a dark skinned man in a long, black raincoat. His head was a tangle of grungy dreadlocks, and dark sunglasses masked his eyes. The stranger's hands were tucked in his coat pockets, and he matched my cold, intense gaze with his own.

My first impulse was to retrieve my handgun, but the intruder stood between the bedroom and me. Instead, I rushed into the kitchen, arming myself with the biggest knife that I could find. I ran back into the living room, ready for battle. The man still stood there, by the doorway, but his countenance had changed considerably. Instead of the face of a black man with dreadlocks, there was now an off-white skull, suspended in the air over the trench coat. As I watched in horror, the unattached skull tilted itself back, and laughed a loud and superior laugh. I was petrified with fear, but luckily, the image faded away moments later.

Of course, these menacing apparitions horrified me at first, causing me to jump back several feet and smash into furniture, or to freeze in my tracks. I mean, watching an armed thug bound towards you and thrusting a sharpened screwdriver towards your midsection can do terrible things to your nervous system.

These hallucinatory attacks were soon so frequent, however, that I began to anticipate when and where they would occur. I actually took a few swipes at the images, which resulted in my knuckles getting bruised from banging into the doors and walls.

On another occasion, and after a long phone conversation with Uma, I settled in for the night. I had only slept for a handful of hours, when I was awakened by a loud noise. The television was on, and the volume knob sounded as if it were turned up as high as it could go. The sound of static echoed into my bedroom. Disconcerted, I left the bed and walked into the living room, all the while sleepily wondering how I could have left the television on. Switching it off, I stood before the TV for a few minutes. The house was deathly silent again.

Upset at being suckered, I shouted a few obscenities at the empty air, and to prevent the incident from reoccurring, I went as far as to unplug the television from the electric outlet, and I tossed the electric cord several feet away. Afterwards, I returned to bed.

Only an hour later, I heard the TV burst into life again, blaring out shrieks of static. I sat up immediately, and as my senses came back to me, I recalled yanking out the power cord earlier. Withdrawing the small pistol from its hiding place, I nervously stalked towards the living room. The irritating static droned on steadily, and through the flickering light from the television set, I tried to make out any strange shapes lurking around. I leveled my gun at an unsteady shadow, which turned out to be from my own recliner. Then, I pointed the weapon at the offending TV, impatiently regarding its cruel noise. For some time, I stood there, resting my finger heavily against the trigger, yet not daring to step forward and lower the volume.

Eventually, I gave in, sidestepping away from the TV without taking my eyes from it, and towards the light switch. I clicked on the switch, turning my eyes instantly towards the power cord, which lay as I'd left it, unplugged, and several feet away from the electrical outlet. As the impossibility of the situation dawned on me, I realized that the television was now off, and had been for the last few seconds. I began to question whether it had been on in the first place, or whether I'd imagined it being on, and much later, when I finally went to bed, I found myself still doubting what I had seen.

The following morning, and after repeated attempts, I managed to get the landlord on the phone. Just as before, she was evasive and contradictory, but my persistence and seriousness related the gravity of my inquiry. I did not divulge the lurid details of my residence, in order not to sway the lady's answers, but she certainly seemed to know what I was referring to. Choosing her words carefully, Marla recalled the former occupants of the house; a middle-aged couple, their two children, aged ten and sixteen, and their elderly grandmother. She stated that this family had lived in the house for many years, and that the grandmother had battled a bad illness for many months. Finally, the old woman was moved to a hospital, where she soon passed away.

Some of the old woman's relatives claimed her spirit was still in the house, Marla related. Small incidents had been reported, she admitted, such as faucets running of their own accord, or objects found mysteriously moved, but nothing more dangerous than that. Marla claimed to be extremely busy, and after revealing nothing more, she rather abruptly excused herself and hung up.

I mulled over her story for a few hours, finding the house's viciousness hard to pass off as my trespassing onto a deceased old woman's property. As it happened, I did not have to wait for the rest of the story much longer. That same afternoon, I received a visitor, the teenage son of the couple that had previously lived in the house. The boy was wearing an oversized gray polo shirt and blue jeans, and his slicked back hair and wary eyes gave him a very streetwise look. He had stopped by to pick up any mail that might have arrived for the family.

As a matter of fact, I had collected quite a bit of correspondence for them, which I soon handed over. "Your family didn't leave a forwarding address?" I asked curiously, to which the kid shook his head. "Did your family move out in a hurry, or something?"

The teen eyed me sharply, and chuckled. "We kind of had to." He replied.

"I know about your grandmother." I told him. "About how sick she was, and how she died in the hospital."

"She didn't die in no hospital." The boy corrected me. "She died in this house. Anyway, that don't matter, cause that was a long time ago. Maybe four, five years ago."

"So that explains the strange things that happen here?" I asked.

"Like what?"

"Like the coldness." I revealed. "Like hearing footsteps, when there's nobody there. Like having nightmares that you can't get rid of. And like..." I paused, searching for the right words. "Like seeing strange things."

The teenage boy laughed lightly. "That's all you've gone through?" He said. "It's going to get a lot worse than that. My advice to you is for you to move out as fast as you can."

"Why do you think so?"

The youth took a deep breath. "For starters, my grandmother wasn't that sick." He told me. "She'd been complaining about nightmares and stuff, too, but we just thought she was getting old or something. She kept telling us that the house was haunted, but my mom was like, whatever. Ain't no such thing as ghosts, she said. Well, Grandma went to bed one night, and she didn't get back up. She died in her sleep."

The words chilled me, even though the sun was still out. "She wasn't that sick?"

“That’s right.” The teen told me. “But that’s not the whole story, either. My mom, and my real dad, moved into this house when I was little. My dad passed away too, just a few months later. He died in his sleep, just like my grandmother, but I don’t remember too much about that because I was so young.

“Anyways, getting back to the present, since my real dad died, my mom keeps finding these losers to shack up with, to help her pay the rent and stuff. She stays with the same guy for a while, then they start fighting with each other and break up, and she goes out looking for somebody else. She’d been going out with this one guy, Flaco, for a couple of years, and finally she let him move in. One of my uncles, my mom’s brother, came by sometimes, and when he met this new guy, my uncle didn’t like Flaco at all. Seems they might have crossed paths once, a long time ago. Whenever they see each other, they start arguing and fighting, and my mom always has to get in between them and break it up.

“One night, my mom’s boyfriend gets real drunk, and he starts arguing with my mom. I tried to shut him up, but my mom had to go and take his side, and I said, screw it, let her deal with it then. My mom’s boyfriend keeps at it, and Flaco tells my mom he’s going to hit her, only I know he won’t, ‘cause he always says that but he never does it. My mom gets all upset this time, and she calls up my uncle to tell him what’s going on.

“My uncle, and I guess he’s been drinking some, too, shows up less than an hour later. He drives down the alley, puts the brakes on real hard a couple of times, and gets off his car yelling stuff. He challenges my mom’s boyfriend to come out and fight, and my mom’s boyfriend, he starts taking off his shirt and heads out the back door. Soon as Flaco steps out, my uncle pulls out his strap, and guns him down. He squeezed off four rounds, and hit my mom’s boyfriend three times in the chest and stomach. I saw the whole thing, ‘cause I was sitting at the kitchen table eating some rolled tacos. My mom and my sister, and one of my mom’s drinking buddies, were all in the house, and they all started screaming and yelling their heads off. My uncle took off, but the cops caught him later. He’s in the pen right now for doing that, got his dumb ass fifteen years. But my mom’s boyfriend, he bit it, right there and then, just outside the kitchen door.”

Wordlessly, I gazed into the boy’s eyes, trying to discern the accuracy of his story. Apparently, he read my misgivings.

“Check the wall next to the kitchen door, if you don’t believe me.” He said. “The fourth bullet hole is still there, same height as the doorknob.” Pausing, the boy glanced around him, and towards the main house, as if to make sure no one else was listening. “You think that’s bad, wait ‘til you hear what happened next. My mom’s boyfriend was dead and buried, and of course, my mom was still upset over him. Then, she starts hearing his footsteps leading up to the front door, just like if he was coming home from work. Regular time and everything. She starts hearing him calling out what he wants for dinner, like he usually did. I never saw this, but she claims she even saw him walking around the living room sometimes, or sitting at the table drinking his coffee. My mom thought she was going crazy. The time she saw him laying in bed next to her, well, that was it. We left the house that same night.”

“Things like that are happening to me.” I admitted.

“Get out then, fool.” The teenager advised. “There’s been at least three people that have died in this house, and probably more, and none of them have been from natural causes. That stupid landlady always told us that all those creaks and noises were just the

house settling, but I'll bet she's still hiding something. She may act like she doesn't know what's going on, but she does. I know she does."

"She hasn't been very helpful." I commented dryly.

"Listen, this ghost, or whatever it is, it tried to kill me." The teen said, suddenly very wary. "If you stay in there long enough, it will probably try to kill you, too. I don't even want to talk about it anymore, 'cause it might just decide to follow me to my new place. You get whoever else moved in with you, and get the hell out of the house. Forget the rent you paid, and your clothes and furniture and stuff, and just get out. I gotta go, man."

Having said that, the youth abruptly turned and walked away from me. As soon as he disappeared from my sight, I hurried around the house and started looking for that bullet hole. I'd seen that hole before, I discovered, during some of my many outside inspections. But now, knowing that the hole was the result of a bullet, I viewed it in a much different light. Now, it stood out like a little reminder of a man's death.

Even after these startling new revelations, there was still a part of me that refused to turn tail and run. "I'm not afraid of you." I said to the house, defiantly.

Throughout all of this, my phone conversations with Uma continued, although the quality of our talks on my end had deteriorated considerably. My attention kept returning to the house, as I was continually trying to deduce what tricks it would pull out of its sleeve next. Regrettably, I was becoming more and more distant from the object of my infatuation.

"Hello? Hello?" Uma would ask frequently, interrupting my brooding thoughts. "Are you even listening to me?"

I cared for Uma deeply, and I began to fear that I might lose her. Still, I could not bring myself to reveal the goings-on at the house to her. That by itself was enough to scare anybody away, as evidenced by the retreat of my own friends.

Somehow, I had to get rid of whatever possessed the house and wrestle back control of my own life. I still had a vague semblance of a plan, and the next item on my list was to bring in religious literature. I placed open Bibles in the living room, kitchen, and the main bedroom. I purchased religious candles, adorned with the pictures of saints, placing one in the bathtub, and another next to my bed, and allowed them to burn through the night. I even had a local priest come by to bless the house, and sprinkle holy water in every room. What was the result of these actions, you ask? Each one temporarily stopped the house's antics, but a day or two later, the incidents resumed, and usually with an increased, vengeful fervor.

The morning after the priest came by was particularly bad. I was wrenched awake by the clamor of loud banging. Sitting up, I realized that the noise was coming from my own closet doors. The doors, of the sliding rail type, had somehow loosened themselves from their rail bases, and were now clapping against each other thunderously. Every time the large wooden doors struck together was loud enough to make me wince from the volume. Panicking, I fled from the bedroom, rapidly undoing the door lock, and hurrying outside.

The morning was a chilly one, and still clad in my sleeping clothes, I shivered, but staunchly refused to move from where I stood. Only when the clapping subsided did I dare to venture back into the house. I returned to the bedroom, finding that nothing was amiss, and cautiously inspected the closet. Taking hold of the sliding doors, I tried to

duplicate the clapping, but no matter how forcefully I banged them, I could not manage anything more than a dull thud.

Having given up on religious solutions, I turned my attentions to other venues. I brought in a self-proclaimed clairvoyant. This woman, looking very ordinary in every respect, promptly arrived and entered the dwelling. She had only taken a few steps into the living room, when she spun around, gasped and stared in shock into the far corner of the room. I asked her what was wrong.

“I saw the demon.” She replied, pointing towards the corner. “It was in human form, but with a hideous, gnarled face. This face is not the demon’s true face, but a mask. The demon uses these disguises to frighten you, because it does not want you to see its true form. Behind this mask is the face of an old man, with a frail and bony body. He was sneering, but when he realized that I could see his true form, he vanished.”

As to the cause of the haunting, the woman informed me that sometime in the past a curse had been put on me, thanks to an old girlfriend. This girlfriend, which she described accurately, had once studied as a hairdresser, and had occasionally cut my hair, both facts that the psychic had accurately deduced. We’d had a bad falling out, this young lady and I, and the clairvoyant revealed that this ex-girlfriend had managed to keep a few locks of my hair. By casting an evil spell on my hair, I was informed, my former girlfriend was passing on pain and suffering on to my physical body.

Strangely, this woman asked for far more information than she divulged, and did not even mention the former occupants of the house, or the three dead family members, knowledge that I deliberately kept from her. She walked through each room, chanting indecipherably, and went on to pronounce the house free of evil spirits. Of course, she collected her fees before she stepped out. Not two days after the woman left, however, the demon she claimed would never return, did in fact return.

By then, I had resided in the house a few days short of two months. After all this time, the evil spirit that continually tormented me was no closer to being evicted than on the first day I had moved in. Nothing that I had done had chased this persistent demon away for very long, even though some of my doings seemed to stumble it. The same trick did not work twice, and when the demon returned, it did so with its vengeance at full throttle. Though it was very difficult for me to concede defeat, I was beginning to realize just how vastly overmatched I actually was.

Glancing at the clock one evening, I found that I had almost missed a very important phone call. It was my turn to call Uma, a routine that I had been following every few nights without fail since I’d first met her. I had become dependent on hearing her voice, and listening to her innermost thoughts and dreams. Without her, there was nothing keeping me from falling apart.

I dialed her number, waiting impatiently for the line to be picked up. After several rings, Uma answered, and immediately, I could sense her reluctance to talk. She quickly excused herself, claiming that she had plenty of homework to keep her busy. If she finished up early, she stated, she would call me back.

The phone clicked loudly as I set it down in its cradle. I carelessly dropped down into the recliner, and after a few short moments, I felt the cold creep up beside me. The sudden chill caused me to stand up, and I began pacing back and forth in the living room.

The demon followed suit, matching my strides step by step. I could sense that it was gloating at me, happy at the brevity of my phone call.

“Stop that!” I yelled out, spinning around to face the demon. Predictably, there was nothing to be seen. In retaliation for the stalking, I turned on several indoor lights. Then, still unsatisfied, I turned on both the radio, and the television set, and set both on high volume. The actions seemed to work, or perhaps the demon just decided to retire after its minor victory. Either way, it left me alone for a short while.

With the spirit not in my immediate vicinity, I was able to connect several things together. First, things had been nowhere near as bad before I had met Uma. Second, many of the worst incidents were being reserved for the nights when I had phone conversations with her. And last, the spirit seemed to be celebrating just a few minutes before, when Uma abruptly ended the night’s call. All of these things pointed towards a hatred for my relationship with Uma.

“So, that’s it. You’re jealous!” I said to the still air in the house. “Is that why you’re doing this to me?”

The demon wanted to break up my relationship with Uma. As the thought crossed my mind, I could sense the spirit drawing nearer to my body. Although I knew I could not win, I was still refusing to feebly roll over and die. I would continue to antagonize my ghostly tormentor, by going against its black wishes. I feigned reaching for the phone several times, hoping it would somehow irritate the malicious entity.

Still, out of consideration for Uma’s request, I did not dial her phone number until two hours later. Never mind that it was near midnight, and that I knew full well that she had classes early the following morning. Her groggy answer revealed that she had indeed been asleep. Did I know what time it was? She asked me.

Of course I did, but nevertheless, I persisted, and somehow convinced her to stay on the line. I began complimenting her beauty, her intelligence, her sensitivity. I bathed her with affection, genuine and heartfelt, feelings that I had been suppressing for so long. I whispered into her ear those romantic secrets that lovers whisper to one another.

Sometime during our conversation, the demon reached its boiling point and set another of its vile plans in motion. It began as a faint commotion, the sounds of many people yelling and running, as if rioting were taking place down the street. The noises grew louder, as if the mob had spilled over onto the property on which I resided. Then the footsteps were heard stomping around the house, followed by hateful cries. The pounding outside rattled in my ears and literally began to shake the entire house.

“What’s going on over there?” Uma asked, fear clearly evidenced in her voice. “Why are all those people screaming?”

In horror, I realized that Uma could also hear the ruckus. The thought occurred to me that perhaps what I was hearing was really happening, after all. I leapt away from the recliner, dropping the phone from my grip, and knocking the lamp off its stand in an effort to turn it off. Since this was the only light on in the house at the time, once I had switched it off, I was immersed in total darkness and the angry voices began penetrating the walls.

“I saw him!”

“He’s in the living room!”

“He cut off the lights!”

“Shoot him, fool!”



“I can’t see him!”

Several distinct men could be heard, and scurrying shadows could be seen running past the window curtains, thanks to my neighbor’s low porch light. Quickly, I crawled into my bedroom, retrieving my handgun from under the pillow, and cocking it ready. As I made my way back into the living room, I could hear the many pairs of footsteps dashing towards the rear of the house.

“I heard something over here!”

“Can you see him?”

Forcing down my fear, I sped to the front door. I was determined to get to the bottom of this, and I flung open the door. Aiming the gun out before me, I calculated the position of my adversaries to be on the opposite side of the residence. Nervously I scampered around the corner of the house. At that moment, I heard the rear gate slam open, followed by the sounds of a handful of panting and retreating bodies spilling out into the alleyway. I was motionless for a few seconds, breathing heavily with adrenalin, listening to the strides running down the alley.

“Go, fool!”

“Go!”

Upon hearing this, I ran to the rear of the house. Seeing nothing, I dove out into the alleyway, unwittingly crashing into the still swinging rear gate. The gate bit into my shoulder callously, knocking me down for a moment. As I regained my footing, I scanned in all directions for any signs of motion, ready to fire.

Except for the light breeze, the night was still. The house had duped me again.

I was furious, so angry at being made to look like a fool yet again, that I raised the gun into the air and broke the tense silence with the loud report of gunfire. I pulled the trigger repeatedly, until I’d exhausted all the ammunition in the clip, and the hammer clicked back at me empty. Then, I walked back into the yard, slamming the gate shut behind me with a loud clang.

Resentfully, I moped back in through the front door, locking it behind me in the usual manner. I turned on the main living room light, but had second thoughts about this, as I was sure that a police cruiser would soon come by to investigate the shots. Shutting the light off, I slowly stepped back towards the recliner. Since my mood was as dark as the house’s, I chose to dwell within it in obscurity.

During the brief moment that the room was revealed, I had seen the telephone, lying hopelessly on the carpet where I had dropped it. As I located and took my seat on the recliner, I became aware that the phone was not emitting that incessant buzzing noise it always makes when it’s off the hook for a few minutes. I reached down for the device, groping uselessly in the dark until my fingers finally encircled the handle. As I lifted the phone up to my ear, I heard a soft, whimpering voice on the other end. It was Uma, crying. She had stayed on the line during the entire incident.

“Uma.” I said, still upset over the house’s prank.

“Is it you?” She stammered out, between sobs. “What happened?” She cried out hysterically. “I heard all the yelling, and then there were shots, and I didn’t know what happened to you!” Her outburst continued, and the words she said soon lost their meaning as they streamed by in a frantic and unintelligible pace.

So, she had stayed on the line the entire time, I thought. When, my dearest Uma, I wondered, would you have brought yourself to disconnect the line? Had the incident been

real, would you have listened in while I exchanged a volley of gunfire with my enemies? If one of my attackers would have picked up the phone, and issued a rash of threats and profanity, would you have hung up then? Or would you have stayed on until the end, until a police officer finally located the phone, and informed you that I was dead?

Scant minutes later, the glare from a police searchlight penetrated through my thin curtains, and slowly traveled through the kitchen and part of the living room, followed closely by the strong hum of the cruiser's engine as it crept closer to the house. I still held the pistol in my hand, and only now felt how hot the metal was against my skin. The bullet casings had dropped onto the alley floor, sure to give away my location.

'I was just shooting at a ghost, officer.' I imagined myself saying to the policemen, if they came out of their patrol car and commanded me to open the front door for them.

I decided to keep quiet, and hoped that they wouldn't discover the casings. Good thing I had already closed the door, and the lights were all off.

Uma's babbling brought my attention back to the phone.

"Be quiet!" I hissed, as if the patrolling policemen might somehow hear her voice.

"What is going on with you?" Uma pleaded.

Resisting the urge to answer sharply, I waited until the squad car moved on before I answered. She deserved to be told everything. Perhaps I should have told her everything from the start.

"Uma," I began my explanation. "I have to tell you what I've been going through."

I started my twisted tale, leaving out nothing, from the bitter conflict between my ex-girlfriend and myself, to my arrival at the house of the damned, to my recently reached conclusion that our budding romance had triggered a malevolent reaction from the resident evil. I gave her as many details as I could remember, hoping to give her as accurate a story as possible.

Not unexpectedly, Uma was left speechless. I realized that what I was telling her might bring about the end of our short relationship, but at this point, and after all I had already gone through, I had to risk it. I had to get everything out in the open.

Understandably, Uma informed me that she needed more time to think things over. Many of the incidents I had related to her came as a shock, since they pertained to things that were not supposed to exist. I concurred with her skepticism, since, had I not experienced such horrors firsthand, I myself would have doubted the sanity of the storyteller. Perhaps I still do.

Even though it was so late, and my news had so obviously flabbergasted the woman, I was still disappointed to let Uma go. Just hearing her voice on the opposite end of the line was enough to give me hope. And then, with our communication so completely truncated, her powerful essence withered away, leaving me once again to continue on with my own meager existence.

But what had I really expected her reaction to be like? Did I really expect her to swallow my startling revelations in one quick gulp? Was I hoping that she would simply brush my wild tale aside, and calmly pursue other subjects of conversation?

I suppose it could have been worse. Uma could have gotten hysterical, what with gunshots and death threats still lingering in the air. Indeed, she had patiently listened to my entire story, with not even a peep to inform me of which conclusion she was leaning towards. I was to call her the following day, at which point we would discuss matters further.

I was alone now, a solitary form on an aging recliner, in a dark house. Not completely alone, mind you, since that which cannot be seen hovered about me, to and fro. On occasion, my curse would swoop down on me like a hungry hawk, forcing my body into involuntary shudders.

How I detested being outmaneuvered. The demon, and I was sure of this, was even now smiling inwardly to itself, knowing exactly how vastly superior it was to me. After all, countless eons might have passed in which this malignant spirit had honed its evil craft, by preying on the unfortunate souls that had innocently or stupidly strayed across its path. It knew it had me boxed in and trapped, leaving me no possible route of escape. I imagined this demon gleefully rubbing its ghoulish hands together, in anticipation of the new schemes it was preparing for me next.

As I resignedly prepared for bed, I could sense the dark entity gliding in ever tightening circles around my head.

“Show yourself, you spawn of evil!” I demanded, but it would not.

The demon had its own arena of battle, one of its own choosing, and perhaps, even of its own construction. It thrived in the dark unknown, that mysterious shadow world of uncertainty and insecurity. It waited on the edge of our finite reality, just beyond the scope of the human senses. When it did strike, its assault was both subtle and blurry, expertly hiding itself as the true culprit, and deceiving its victims into questioning the complexities of their own mind. Unseen, this demon and others like it haunt us, every one of us, exploiting our own weaknesses, and patiently stripping us of the hold on the material world that we commonly refer to as sanity.

You ask, how do I know all of this? The answer is simply because I have spent so much time residing with this uncaring ghoul. I have seen through its eyes, just as it has seen through mine. I have felt its corruptive evil coursing through my hollow being, my empty frame. And now, I could feel its anger. Anger at having its existence revealed to someone on the outside of its chosen battlefield. Anger towards me for having informed Uma of the bizarre game we were playing with each other.

Later that night, while I was in a deep slumber, the demon chose to show me just how angry it was. It struck me on the side of the head, painfully jarring me awake. The blow was disconcerting, and solid, like that of a baseball bat. It had been strong enough to knock me onto the floor beside the bed, and stunned and helpless, I lay there for an unknown amount of time. I recall drifting back and forth between consciousness and unconsciousness, before a blissful sleep finally found me and drifted me away to more relaxing thoughts. When I awoke in the morning, I quickly realized I’d slept on the floor, and I had a throbbing bruise on the side of my head where I’d been struck.

The next day was long and arduous, as time seemed to stretch itself to its limits in an effort to keep me from my rendezvous with Uma. Slowly, the seconds trickled by that night, unnerving me with their sluggishness. Finally, I could take it no more, and although it was still a couple of hours before the appointed time, I dialed Uma’s phone number.

I should have waited. Our conversation was forced and awkward, and I quickly began to lose interest in her. She claimed she had been experiencing her own unexplainable happenings. Her bedroom lights would flicker on and off, she stated, and her phone would ring repeatedly, but when answered, she would only hear the dial tone.

She too could feel a strange, chilling breeze blow past her body, causing her to shiver suddenly.

I could see right through Uma's lies. She was baiting me, trying to discredit my shocking experiences by fabricating some of her own. If I pronounced her incidents as genuine, she would quickly admit that she had made them all up, and charge that my tales were fiction as well. I was not stupid enough to fall for such a silly deception.

Even the demon haunting me felt insulted.

I dared not tell Uma any of this, however. As our conversation progressed, unfortunately it also continued to deteriorate. I could not convince her of the validity of my claims, which she thought were wanton lies to cover up some dastardly deed I was trying to cover up, like cheating on her. Neither could she get me to accept her own absurd statements.

Finally, our talk ended on a sour note. Everything that needed to be said had been said, and there was no point in continuing any further. It was over between us.

To further exact its revenge, the demon assaulted me that night again. While I slept, it somehow managed to quietly pull the covers over my head. Suddenly, it thrust its weight down over my chest and arms. As I realized that I was trapped under the blankets, one of its malignant hands closed over my mouth, preventing me from calling out. Its other hand gripped my throat, greatly restricting my breaths. I struggled to move out from underneath the pressing weight, and wildly tore at the stronger limbs pinning me to my bed. Finally, as I felt myself growing faint, the cruel beast released me.

Rapidly, I threw the blankets away from my face, but there was nothing around to look at. Only the dark walls of the bedroom were around me, cackling away in a torturous laugh that reminded me of how insignificant and pitiful I really was.

The night passed slowly, as slow as the day that followed it. This new day came, and stayed awhile, and then it too was gone. It hadn't bothered to excuse itself, or to remind me of when the next day might come calling. No tip of the hat, no farewell wave, no 'see you later.' Nothing.

And then, I found myself sitting on the recliner again, and it was night. But it wasn't just any night, joining into a hazy recollection with a thousand nights before it. No sir, this night was special, because this night was tonight.

I tried calling Uma several times. The first time, as soon as she heard my voice, she hung up on me. Every time I've called since then, she doesn't pick up. Her phone just rings and rings, like the soundtrack on some broken carousel. I want so desperately to speak with her, to hear her voice.

What's that?

The demon just told me that my relationship with Uma is now officially over. We were finished, done with, kaput. I'd known this already, of course, but the demon couldn't help but gloat over my loss.

Maybe the demon did stop by her place, once or twice, it hinted to me, and it may have even caused some lights to flicker, or the phone to ring. Maybe once or twice it did that. I am completely confused now, after hearing this. I just don't know whom, or what, to believe anymore.

Taking a deep, reflective breath, I concentrate on Uma. I really do care for her, I think to myself. No, care is not a strong enough word for what I feel for her. I love Uma,

truly and deeply, even though I've only known her a short time. But the warmth she exuded towards me was gone, and those few seconds of ecstasy we had briefly shared were now rapidly fleeting into the sunset of yesterday.

"Well, that's what you wanted, isn't it?" I asked the dark house. The salty streaks of moisture that slid past my lips must have been tears, but I ignored them.

The house did not answer my question. Instead it waited, watching what response it could prod from me just by staying still and silent. The infinite gloom dropped down to settle around my shoulders, further saturating me with a cold despair.

There were so many things that I should have told Uma, things that I had kept from her until the last moment. Now, it was too late to make amends. More icy tears fell from my eyes, shed for the broken promises of what could have been. Uma was gone, a lone, faded spark in my meaningless life. With her sudden departure, much of what I had been looking forward to had died. I became a broken fool, as Uma had been the glue that had been holding me together. I was reduced to nothing. Perhaps I was now less than nothing.

"All because of your stupid jealousy!" I cried out to the emptiness of the house. "That's why you took her away from me, because me and her could have had something that you will never have! Something you will never know!"

The house had torn my life apart by stealing that which I held closest to my heart. It wanted to reduce me into a shattered person, an empty void so much like it was.

"I hate you!" I shouted, feeling reckless and furious. "I hate you! I hate you!"

I stood up quickly, ready to explode, and feeling the recliner recoil from my sudden action. "Since I moved in, you've been screwing up my entire life!"

The demon mischievously darted past me, and I turned my head in the direction it fled. "You just had to go after her, didn't you? Because you couldn't break me! After all of this time, and I'm still here! I'm fighting you on your own terms, and you can't beat me!"

I could feel the demon stop, near the wall leading to the kitchen. It turned back towards me, curiously listening to my tirade.

"And you're still running back and forth, aren't you? Hiding in the dark all this time. Now you tell me, who's got more balls?" I yelled. "I've had enough of you! If you want a fight, I'll give you one! Come over here where I can see you! Come and meet me, face to face! Show yourself! SHOW YOURSELF!!"

I doubt that anyone on Earth could truly be prepared for what happened next.

Suddenly, I felt a pair of eyes watching me, from a different corner of the living room. Still fuming, I turned to face it, witnessing the specter of the barbarian, ghostly pale, nearly transparent, and still holding his broad axe. Clenching my hands into fists, I sensed another form near me, that of the one-eyed pirate, sneering from another corner of the room. Yet another form appeared, that of the hardened convict. Soon, others came forward from the walls. Some, I recognized from previous haunts, others were new apparitions that I had never seen before.

Still others materialized, pushing earlier arrivals forward to make room for even more ghosts and devils that kept appearing behind them. Each face was distinct, yet they shared many common traits. They were all rugged, gnarled, heavily scarred, or deformed in some hideous fashion. Some of the images wore earrings, or eye patches, while others displayed tattoos, and every single one brandished some sort of weapon.

They simply stood there, these eerie phantoms, completely silent and eternally staring in my direction. It was as if they were awaiting some signal, resigning themselves only to mill forward a few inches whenever more of their number pressured them from behind.

I shuddered as the apparitions began to crowd around me. I hadn't been sure of what to expect when I had issued my challenge to the demon, but it was certainly not this. The sheer volume of their presence quickly destroyed what little fortitude I still held.

In a blind panic, I dashed towards the back door. Every form I touched caused me to shiver, and with the house so crowded, I had to shove at them just to clear a path. I was having trouble controlling my own breathing, and through dizzy spells, I fumbled with the door locks. Finally, I hurled the back door open, and ran outside.

To my dismay, I discovered that the ghosts were everywhere. I spun in all directions, trying in vain to find some relief. A few had even perched themselves on the edge of the roof, their pale and clammy legs hanging down near my head. On the ground, so many were trying to push in through the walls, and so many were already inside, that some had become stuck halfway through the barrier, their arms and torsos partially visible like a splatter of dismembered corpses. Countless others slowly trudged through the back alley, all heading for the tiny gate to the property, the gate that seemed to be the only access they had into the yard.

Faced with the immensity of the spectral crowd, I resigned myself to going no further. The constant shivering I received from the contact with the phantoms, coupled with the coolness of the midnight breeze, made me reconsider even staying outside.

Grumbling at my overwhelming defeat, I forced the swaying apparitions aside, and reentered the house.

Now, I have lived in the house for one week past two months. I have not been doing so much these last few days. I haven't gone to work, because I just don't want to deal with my boss anymore. I know he'll say something about my beard, since I stopped shaving some time ago, right after the demon tried to slice my throat with my own disposable shaver. It would have taken a hell of a lot of swipes, I chuckled.

In fact, I really haven't left my recliner at all the last couple of days. I've been very comfortable sitting just where I am.

I haven't even answered the phone in a while. It had been ringing constantly, maybe once or twice in a single day. I really don't care too much about talking on the phone any more. Maybe the next time it rings, I'll just yank it from the wall and be done with it. That should take care of the problem very nicely, thank you very much.

Marla, the landlady, doesn't come around anymore, either. At the beginning of the month, she came by a few times, bugging me about the rent. Then, for some strange reason, she simply stopped coming.

The demon tells me that I'm responsible for her disappearing like that, but I don't know what it's talking about. Still, it gets all excited whenever I bring up the subject. First, it points at all the dark stains on the carpet, and then it motions me over to the tiny kitchen window, and gestures excitedly at one of the empty lots across the back alley. I don't know what caused the stains on the carpet, or why they suspiciously trail towards the kitchen and back door, but whatever they are, they sure smell. As for the empty lot, I can see a mound of dirt where someone's been digging recently. Sometimes, I want to go

over there and see for myself what lies buried under that mound, but I can never seem to work up the nerve to do it. I mean, what if the demon is right?

The demon and me, we've been getting along pretty good. In fact, he told me his real name. It's Mo-Mo-Mo-Mo-Mo, which he claims is short for Molech. I tease him by calling him Mo'lick, which for some reason gets him all riled up.

Anyway, we play cards sometimes. Mo usually wins, which makes me wonder if he's cheating, him being invisible and all, by floating around the table and looking over my shoulder at my hand. I can't be sure, however, since I've never actually caught him doing it.

Mo tried to show me how to do some tricks, but I'm not so good at that. He keeps telling me that my flesh is holding me back, and that if I got rid of my flesh, I would be doing so much better. I told Mo to go to Hell, which I found to be hilarious. Mo, of course, didn't like the remark, and got all upset over it. He left again, but I know he'll come back sooner or later. Mo is always doing dumb things like that.

I've been getting kind of hungry after sitting here so long. Maybe I should go over to the fridge. I would, except I don't remember if I have any food left. If the refrigerator is empty, then the whole trip would end up being one big waste of time.

Still, I should get something to eat.

Maybe I'll do that...

Tomorrow.

Or the next day.

#####

About Two Bedroom Cottage For Rent: If you don't believe in ghosts, you may consider this story purely as entertainment. If you do believe, or if you haven't made up your mind yet (perhaps I shouldn't be telling you this, but...), many of the incidents described in the story actually happened to me. And by many, I'm saying that 80 to 90% of this novella describes real events, at least from my perspective (a psychiatrist might argue otherwise). The only fictional portions are the short amount of time the main character lived with the couple near the beginning of the story, Marla's mysterious ending, and a few trivial details such as names and addresses.

(A very few people experience psychic and supernatural phenomena during their lifetimes, while the vast majority of the population does not. I was cursed to experience what you could consider a plethora of bizarre occurrences and hauntings, primarily from my mid-teens through my mid-twenties, although these apparitions haven't completely abandoned me to this day.)

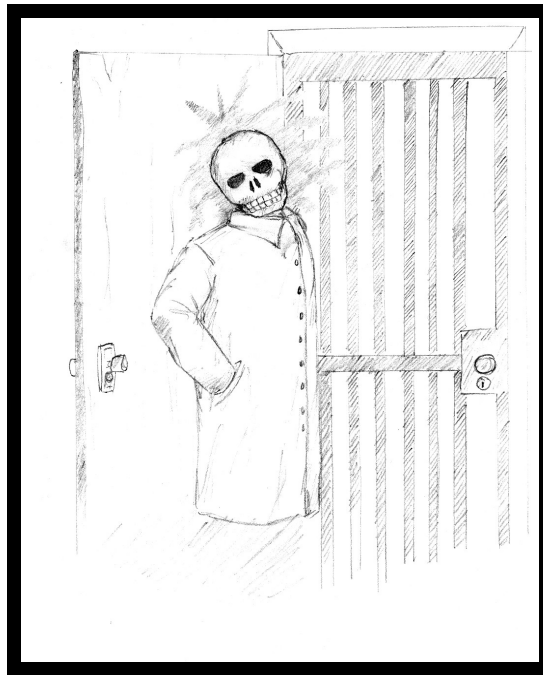
The two bedroom cottage is not one, but two similar dwellings located on the 3900 block of Logan Avenue, in San Diego, California. In the first, I occupied the tiny house with my ex-wife (then my girlfriend) and two young daughters, for a period of perhaps a year and a half. While most of our stay there was fairly pleasant, towards the end the relationship with my ex-wife had become so strained that we ended up going our separate ways. She moved away, and I moved next door, where the real excitement began.

I had a buddy that did live in that house immediately before I did, and the deaths in his family did happen (Including the fatal altercation between his mother's boyfriend and his uncle. I was watching TV next door when this happened.). The accounts of ghostly activity that occurred to him and his family members were slightly embellished for the story, but nevertheless accurate. The nightmares, the coldness, the pinching, the terrifying and violent specters that appeared damn near all night long, all of this I personally went through.

The short lived romance with a young lady from Los Angeles, and its tumultuous ups and downs, that happened too, including the phone call where she heard several hoodlums surround the house and scream threats at me. I might have gone insane there, for a bit, just as the main character seems to when he refuses to leave the house and resolves to fight it out with the demon. (Or was it more than one demon? Maybe it was a dozen of them. I'll never know the true answer to this.) As for the dozens upon dozens of phantasms crowding against each other, when the main character challenged the demonic spirit to show itself, well, all I can say about that is that they were all freezing to the touch, and they were all over the place, just as described. I'd tried everything I could to get rid of the demon, and short of sleeping in my car, I really didn't see any other alternative other than to lower my head in resignation, and step back inside to concede my defeat.

Even after I abandoned the cottage, and hastily moved in with my girlfriend, the evil followed me, but the incidents soon lost their ferocity and frequency, and eventually we were left in relative peace.

For reference, please look up the true stories of the Amityville Haunting and the Bell Witch, which I found out about a few years later, for many similarities to my experiences.



Seen just after I'd entered The Two Bedroom Cottage, circa 1994.



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About the author: Raymond M. Towers is an aspiring author of Mexican-American descent, although the term Chicano describes him much more accurately. He was born in 1970 in San Diego, California, and from an early age showed an interest in becoming a great storyteller. In fact, he was drawing and distributing his own crude comic books using pencil and blank paper, as far back as the fourth grade.

Alas, life happens, and due to both circumstance and procrastination, Raymond set his ambitions on the back burner for many years. While he did enjoy mild success in his submissions to literary markets, he felt he could improve his talents considerably by concentrating more fully on his writing, and for over a decade now, he has made every effort to produce a polished and complete product. Now in his early forties, the author finally is ready to share his vision with the world.

If you've enjoyed reading this story, please take a moment to jot down a quick review of this title on [Smashwords](#). Not only will this help in getting the word out about the author, but it might bring you good karma as well. Thank you for your support.

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